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SUBJECT: ROMANIA'S ROMA: STILL ON THE PERIPHERY

Summary

¶1. (SBU) As Romania's Roma celebrate their National Day this week, the community remains on the outskirts of mainstream Romanian society in almost every respect: politically disenfranchised; lacking access to adequate education, housing and employment; and victimized by prejudicial campaigns in the media and by popular stereotypes. Conversations with Roma activists, intellectuals, artists, students, a Parliamentarian, and the President of the government's Roma Protection Agency revealed frustration with the community's lack of political organization, unity and clout. Nevertheless, our interlocutors noted a few positive trends: better government efforts to liaise with Roma communities; a significant decrease in physical violence against the Roma, and less vulgar racist rhetoric than in the past. Lack of reliable statistics, disorganization and apathy at the community level, and low levels of education, continue to hamper efforts to assist the Roma -- or help them help themselves.

Stereotypes and Segregation

¶2. (SBU) Popular perceptions of the Roma remain negative. According to a 2008 poll coordinated by the National Council to Combat Discrimination (NCCD), 71 percent of Romanians believe Roma are the perpetrators of criminal activity. Between 45 and 50 percent view negatively the possibility of having a Roma relative. Sixty percent favor travel restrictions on Roma wishing to go abroad. The NCCD chair told us the most common complaint at the Council was from Roma denied access to public places. Segregation, he said, was particularly strong in education and housing. The continued practice of placing Roma children in classes for the handicapped, and the desire of both Roma and non-Roma parents to keep their children separate, were the primary culprits. In terms of housing, most Roma communities are situated at the margins of cities and towns, and many Roma, lacking property titles, are forced to leave even these areas when land developers arrive. The Director of the Roma NGO Romani CRISS told us of a recent case in which twenty Roma families were relocated twenty kilometers outside their town, with no access to schools, public transport or employment opportunities. The NCCD chair separately told us that plans to build segregated housing for Roma in the provinces continue today.

The Media and "Linguistic Violence"

¶3. (SBU) Across the board, our interlocutors complained about negative media coverage of the Roma. While the racist language appearing in the media was perceived as less vulgar and more nuanced than a decade ago, there still existed what the local UNICEF director termed "linguistic violence." In early March, for example, the popular mainstream daily Jurnulul National (JN) launched a campaign to ban the word "Roma" from official usage and substitute the term "Tsgani," which many Roma consider pejorative. "Tsgani" is of Greek origin and roughly translates to "impure." For the measure to go to Parliament, organizers need to collect 100,000 signatures. As of the end of last week, they had gathered

only 26,000. In the meantime, Romani CRISS began planning for a counter-petition to ban the word "Tsgani," and expressed confidence they would reach the 100,000 mark. However, because the initial petition drive appears to be sputtering, Romani CRISS has postponed plans to circulate the counterpetition.

¶4. (SBU) Note: On April 2, 2009, the MFA sent a follow-up note verbale to the U.S. Consulate in Bucharest asking that the three-letter alpha numeric code for Romania be "ROU" and not "ROM." This code, approved by the International Organization for Standardization (IOS), is used on the printed visa foils on Romanians' passports and on other international identification documents. Romania first asked for IOS approval for this change in 2002 and sent a note verbale to the Consulate in 2008 on the same issue. The Department has not issued its approval as yet. We see this request as yet another example of linguistic discrimination against "roma," especially given the Romanians' dislike of the Russian rendition of their country name as "Rumania," which they traditionally see as erasing their Latin/Roman roots. End note.

¶5. (SBU) Roma are divided over the meaning and impact of the JN campaign. The President of the government's Roma Protection Agency said that many Roma couldn't care less, as they were more concerned with daily problems of poverty and unemployment. Several of our NGO contacts thought the JN campaign was a reaction to the negative publicity Romania accrued following a crime wave in Italy in which Roma were implicated. The head of a media-monitoring NGO argued that the problem lay not with any media drive, but with Romanian insecurity over being associated with Roma in the minds of outsiders. "Ask someone about Romania and Roma will be one of the first five things mentioned," said the NCCD Chair. "They're a Romanian 'brand'."

Disorganized, Divided and Devoid of Influence

¶6. (SBU) Roma remain easily subject to political manipulation. Rather than identify with their small, ethnically based "party" (Note: It legally is an NGO, and has only one member in Parliament.), Roma tend to identify themselves with the dominant political party in their locality. Across the board, our interlocutors agreed that politicians open up to Roma only by offering food for votes, and then abandon them after getting elected. The PSD was particularly guilty of this practice, a researcher at the Center for Roma Research told us, but all political parties did it. Roma activists and students expressed frustration that this was so easily done but difficult to solve, largely due to the dire economic circumstance of the constituents. The end result was declining Roma confidence in local government and greater apathy.

¶7. (SBU) A central theme of our discussions was why the Roma, Romania's largest minority, were unable to exert political clout along the lines of Romania's ethnic Hungarians or achieve the unity of Romania's small Jewish community. According to Istvan Haller, an NCCD board member, the Roma movement suffered from a lack of connectivity between the Roma intellectual strata and grassroots communities. Some contacts disagreed but identified other cross-cutting cleavages that made unity difficult to achieve. Roma remain divided by their level of education, traditional or modern outlook, rural or urban residence, and even language. (Note: some Roma speak Hungarian and not Romanian). Such divisions do not occur in Romania's ethnic Hungarian communities. And in contrast to Romania's Jews, the Roma do not have a strong sense of collective memory around which to unite.

Education: A Mess at the Bottom

¶8. (SBU) Aside from the problem of segregation, our contacts widely agreed that not enough Roma are attending primary and secondary school. No reliable statistics are available, but

Maria Korek of the NGO Project on Ethnic Relations estimates that of those Roma in school, 75 percent either did not attend kindergarten or attend school irregularly. While in the past many Roma children stayed home because they lacked clothing, Roma parents are today's "hugely negative influence," she said. The need to put food on the table and the lack of parental motivation brought on by unemployment and apathy often keep the kids out of the classrooms, she explained. Teacher role models are relatively few, as the percentage of Roma schoolteachers is thought to be disproportionately less than the percentage of Roma students.

The situation at the university level appears somewhat better, as special slots exist for Roma at state universities and some public high schools. And the Presidential Advisor on Minorities opined that the quality of the Roma intelligentsia was improving.

Lack of Information Hampers Planning

¶9. (SBU) In contrast to Romania's other minority communities, no one is sure how many Roma live in Romania. The official population is 535,140, according to the 2002 census, but estimates range up to two million and over. These estimates reflect the likelihood that many Roma instead identify themselves as ethnic Romanians or ethnic Hungarians. Statistical uncertainty and lack of systematic research makes it more difficult to design and enact affirmative action policies, fix the schools and monitor human rights abuses, several contacts noted. "We don't know how many Roma there are in the education system, or the special education system," complained the UNICEF director. Nor is there data on police raids against Roma or forced relocations, said a representative from the respected NGO Center for Legal Resources. This lack of data makes it harder to measure progress over time.

Comment: A few bright spots

¶10. (SBU) While this is a bleak report, it is not all bad news. Physical violence against the Roma appears on the wane. In contrast to Hungary and Slovakia, there have not been recent anti-Roma attacks here, and the NCCD has received no reports of attacks against Roma neighborhoods or individuals this year. Roma activists also report that the economic downturn has not been accompanied by a concomitant increase in the number of hate crimes. Meanwhile, the government has reached out to Roma communities by assigning 600 "health mediators" who facilitate Roma access to health care. Roma advisors also exist in almost every prefect's office (Note: The prefect is the central government's representative in each county). Importantly, interest in these issues remains high; a Public Diplomacy-sponsored debate on Roma Day and a joint U.S. Embassy-Romani CRISS reception both had excellent turnouts. The number of Roma-focused NGOs continues to grow, and our contacts perceive an increase in the number of Roma activists in country. We were impressed by the young, energetic Roma we met, and their willingness to lead.

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